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SUBJECT: PIF MINISTERIAL MEETING ON FIJI

REF: STATE 30331

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. On March 26, Pacific Island Forum (PIF) Foreign Ministers met in Auckland to review the situation in Fiji, in particular to assess progress by the Interim Government (IG) towards meeting the commitments made by Commodore Bainimarama to PIF leaders in Tonga in October [1](#)2007. In an outcome document, PIF officials were united in outlining their strong concerns about the IG's degree of progress towards the holding of elections in the first quarter of 2009, human rights issues surrounding the media and the judiciary that may impinge on the environment necessary for free and fair elections, and the continued IG focus on the People's Charter process, which PIF Ministers worry may divert focus from election preparations. Fiji Interim Foreign Minister Nailatikau, head of the IG delegation, criticized visa sanctions, emphasized the importance of the People's Charter to national reconciliation and the election process, and blamed the international community for the lack of progress to date. Commonwealth representative Sir Paul Reeves briefed the ministers on his effort to encourage political dialogue. Reeves intends to visit Suva again in late April. The ministers agreed unanimously to augment the monitoring of the Fiji situation via a Ministerial Contact Group. Nailatikau promised an IG timetable for elections by mid-April. End Summary.

Auckland PIF Ministerial Keeps Pressure on Fiji IG

[1](#)2. (SBU) When Pacific Island Forum leaders met in Tonga in October 2007, they instructed PIF Foreign Ministers to meet early in 2008 to review progress by the IG towards Commodore Bainimarama's promise of a free and fair parliamentary election in the first quarter of 2009. The March 26 ministerial in Auckland considered a report by the PIF-Fiji Joint Working Group and a presentation by interim Foreign Minister Ratu Epeli Nailatikau. Nailatikau complained bitterly about visa sanctions, specifically mentioning "the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand." He reaffirmed the IG's election commitment, but also emphasized the IG view that the People's Charter process is an essential pre-election step

for Fiji's future. It will be a "strategic framework" for future governments and is the military's "exit strategy." Several Pacific Island Country (PIC) representatives queried Nailatikau about a seeming contradiction between the "commitment" to elections and the People's Charter. They also inquired about human-rights problems. Nailatikau reportedly stuck closely to the standard IG brief. Thereafter, the IG delegation was asked to leave the room. (Note: We hear the IG tried hard the night before to be allowed to stay in place throughout, but PIF ministers, citing Tonga as precedent, said "no." End Note.)

13. (SBU) In subsequent discussion, Australia and New Zealand raised their well-known concerns about the state of affairs in Fiji; and a good number of Island ministers, including those from PNG, Solomon Islands, Niue, Samoa, and the Cooks, reportedly also raised serious worries about the IG's approach to governance and its half-hearted efforts to prepare for free and fair elections. Several, including Samoa, praised the visa sanctions imposed by Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., and others as helping focus the IG on important issues. PNG proposed, and ministers approved, setting up a Ministerial Contact Group (MCG) to take monitoring of IG electoral preparations to a higher level in the lead-up to the next PIF leaders meeting in Niue in August. Contact Group minister members will be Australia, New Zealand, PNG, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu. Reportedly, the MCG came about because ministers saw a need for more clout than the PIF-Fiji Working Group could provide, but the IG and some other PIC governments had objections to resuscitating last year's Eminent Persons Group.

WELLINGTON 00000114 002 OF 003

14. (SBU) In their deliberations, ministers judged the draft outcomes document as "too soft" on the IG and ordered the toughening of language throughout. The final document, agreed to unanimously, outlines the PIF's strong view that the IG is expected to fulfill Bainimarama's election promises in Tonga. (The Commodore promised that all parties will be allowed to compete under the current constitution's rules in free and fair polls and that the military will respect the outcome.) The document expresses concern about election preparations to date as well as about human rights developments that could undermine conditions necessary for a free and fair electoral process. It welcomes the IG's promise to provide a timetable for elections by the end of the second week in April as well as the announcement that an elections supervisor will be appointed shortly. Finally, it announces the Ministerial Contact Group and expresses appreciation for a parallel effort by Sir Paul Reeves to facilitate dialogue.

Commonwealth/Reeves Effort for Political Dialogue

15. (SBU) During the Ministerial, Sir Paul Reeves was invited to brief delegations on his effort, at Commonwealth urging, to foster a political dialogue in Fiji among the leading political players from all sides. The decision of Bainimarama and interim Finance Minister Chaudhry not to participate in a group meeting when Reeves visited Suva in early March was disappointing; but Reeves received a letter from Bainimarama early on March 26 inviting a follow-on visit and expressing appreciation for the conversations that had occurred. In that light, Reeves intends to return to Suva in late April to try again to bring the parties together for talk. (Note: We heard from several well-placed sources at the Auckland meeting that it was Chaudhry and interim Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum who discouraged Bainimarama from participating in the Reeves dialogue in March. Those sources of pressure, and Bainimarama's own unwillingness to engage deposed PM Qarase face-to-face, could still impede dialogue, but Reeves told us he is willing to give his effort at least one more shot. End Note.)

¶6. (SBU) The PIF did not permit non-PIF members to sit in on the meeting, but USG officials spoke with a number of participants before and after to make USG views clear and to solicit comments on the state of play. Australian Foreign Minister Smith, attending his first PIF meeting on Fiji, told us he was very satisfied with the way the region continued to stand firm on the need for proper elections, without interference from the People's Charter process. He sees the Ministerial Contact Group essentially as a contingency mechanism to be invoked as necessary to keep pressure on and to ensure leaders at the PIF meeting in Niue are fully informed. New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) officials said the results were as good they could have hoped for, and FM Peters was happy. They said it was clear before the meeting that PIC governments were not pleased with Fiji, and ministers made that clear both when the IG delegation was in the room and even more so afterwards. The IG could not easily conclude that the process was being driven by New Zealand and Australia. We heard from several PIF delegations similar expressions of satisfaction with the continued PIF unity of concern and of purpose.

¶7. (SBU) The Tonga, Niue, PNG, Australia and New Zealand Foreign Ministers held a post-meeting press conference. They stressed that the region is expecting the IG to fulfill Bainimarama's promises in Tonga, and the PIF will be optimistic about IG intentions unless otherwise warranted. That said, ministers noted skepticism -- particularly

WELLINGTON 00000114 003 OF 003

surrounding the IG emphasis on the People's Charter process -- that only the Fiji IG can overcome by living up to its commitments to the international community. The Ministerial Contact Group is to help monitor IG progress and promote constructive and productive dialogue. Smith noted that a MCG visit to Fiji may not be necessary if the IG makes sufficient progress on its own, pre-Niue. He offered that, in the first instance, the FMs will encourage the Reeves effort. Niue PM Vivian Young said that the Ministerial Contact Group would raise the level of dialogue with IG authorities, bumping it up from the working level.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) The PIF Ministers fulfilled their mission admirably. They, and not just Australia and New Zealand, made clear they continue to expect the IG to move expeditiously with a timetable to fulfill its commitment to facilitate acceptable elections by March 2009. The unified PIF message to the IG delegation in Auckland was impressive, and it seemed clearly to have affected Nailatikau and his delegation. When they departed the meeting, all IG-delegation faces, including Nailatikau's, looked somber and subdued, and they declined to do a media conference. The IG undoubtedly hoped to hear expressions of understanding. That didn't happen. Instead, they faced a solid front of PIF delegations that were not inclined to give the IG the benefit of the doubt and who were pressing the same themes the USG has been pressing.
MCCORMICK